Almost (you)

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Almost (you)

by NiciJones

Summary

Bucky pauses, mug raised halfway to his mouth. “You’re not waiting for marriage, are you?”

Gale snaps his mouth shut, looking away. “It’s proper, John,” he tells him under his breath.

“Oh my god,” Bucky says and he really has no business looking so shocked. “But you have- You’ve done it before, right?” He leans forward, eyes wide and bright.

Gale clenches his jaw, the embarrassment curling in his stomach.

Bucky’s mouth falls open. “*Saint Gale Cleven,*” he drawls, shaking his head. “She slapping your fingers black and blue every time you meet up?” He asks.

OR it takes Gale 7 years to figure out that he loves him

Notes

This was supposed to be a fic centered around Hozier's Almost and it turned out to be anything but. The title still fits though and I can't imagine calling it anything else at this point. Enjoy this messy ride full of denial and yearning and repressed feelings...

I've finished the whole thing and I'm thinking of updating about twice a week? But I'll also be traveling so we'll see how it goes.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Marge is so glad when the rain they forecast doesn't come to pass. No, instead it's all blue skies and she's grinning so bright it could rival the sun. Her perfectly painted nails dig into the lapels of Buck's jacket when they pose for a picture and her perfume fills his nose and makes him want to sneeze and cough. He fights the urge down though, just like the urge to look over at Bucky in his matching uniform.

As long as he hasn't fallen over, Gale will count it as a win. He recalls too clearly the sight of him this morning, tie crooked and alcohol on his breath and the look he'd given Gale when he'd seen him. He knows it showed on his face, the pain and the fear of seeing John like that, today of all days. Bucky hadn't said anything and that, too, was worrying.

So he'd stepped up to him, fixed his tie, adjusted his jacket to hide a whiskey stain on his shirt. "I thought you said we're fine," he'd whispered, knowing he'll have to go out there soon, stand in front of them and marry the love of his life.

"Just peachy, Major Cleven," Bucky had said and his face had split into a broad grin.

It was always supposed to end like this: both of them walking away from the war victorious, Gale finally putting a ring on Marge and having his best friend by his side. This is everything he's ever wanted and yet, he feels like he's falling from the sky all over again knowing that when he reaches the ground he would be trapped in enemy territory for who knows how long.

Marge gets swept away by her family after the pictures have been taken and he can't help but smile when she looks back at him. At least he's made her happy. At least he's done that right. When he turns, he sees Bucky stalking away, broad shoulders retreating and Gale knows he shouldn't follow him.

His feet almost move nevertheless, when Benjamin suddenly claps his hand on his shoulder, pulling him in. "Big night tonight, huh? Enjoy it before you get bored of it." Gale knows with nauseating clarity what he's talking about. "Not your first time, I hope," Benjamin teases quietly.

Gale's stomach drops and he pushes him away. "Shut the fuck up,

Ben," he mumbles, vomit crawling up his throat.

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In hindsight, Gale knows he did it to himself and no matter what people would assume if he were to tell them, he'd been as much to blame as Bucky - if not more so. He hadn't seen it or not wanted to see it at the time, but he'd leaned in just as much, had lived on their excuses and shoved his hands down Bucky's pants first half of the time. That's not how it had started though. No, it started with-

"God, she was loud," Bucky says one morning, touching his ear like he can still hear screams in it. Perhaps he could, who was Gale to say, sitting across from him feeling his cheeks heat. It's not right to talk about these things, not where Gale is from. He knows, of course, how the men talk here.

Coming to basic training from his small town had been quite the shock but Gale manages to hide it well, knows he's better off letting them talk, even though he feels torn between the shame of his own inexperience and the dread because of it. He thinks of sweet Marge and her mischievous grin when their kissing turns heated. They always stop, pulling apart before things get too serious but her eyes make Gale wonder sometimes if he asked, would she say yes? He doesn't dare to find out.

"What about that girl of yours, Buck?" Bucky asks, leaning back in his chair and sipping his mug of coffee. His legs are spread wide beneath the table and he has the hint of a smirk on his face - Gale has come to expect that look whenever Bucky would return from such a night.

"Marge?" He asks, clearing his throat and feeling his cheeks heat even further. There'd been the occasional sigh, his hand resting on her back where he could feel the clasp of her bra under his hand as he pulled her closer.

"Yeah. She a screamer, too?" Bucky asks. There is no lewd look in his eyes, just plain curiosity. All the men talk about this. Comparing their conquests, palms curving to indicate the size of breasts under their fingertips while Gale looks the other way, ignores the heat rising under his collar.

Any other man, Gale would have told off for insinuating what Bucky just did, perhaps even punch him but the words get stuck in his throat, feeling his cheeks heat instead. He opens his mouth, trying to reach for the right words that would prevent Bucky from asking more
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questions.

Bucky pauses, mug raised halfway to his mouth. “You’re not waiting for marriage, are you?”

Gale snaps his mouth shut, looking away. “It’s proper, John,” he tells him under his breath.

“Oh my god,” Bucky says and he really has no business looking so shocked. “But you have- You’ve done it before, right?” He leans forward, eyes wide and bright.

Gale clenches his jaw, the embarrassment curling in his stomach. He knows exactly what he looks like right now, a prudish Christian boy. Too naive to even know what to do when Marge puts his hand on her thigh, too scared to push it under her skirt and pull her fully into his lap. “Don’t know how that’s any of your business,” Gale mumbles, hand smoothing down his pant leg nervously. He doesn’t want Bucky to make fun of him or for it to make the rounds on base. But this is Bucky and ever since he’s met him, Bucky had teased him relentlessly but never tolerated anyone else doing the same to Gale. Not once.

Bucky’s mouth falls open. “*Saint Gale Cleven*,” he drawls, shaking his head. “She slapping your fingers black and blue every time you meet up?” He asks.

Gale’s fingers curl and he pushes himself up. “I have to go change before class.” He walks away, convincing himself he isn’t running away and he doesn’t feel Bucky’s eyes on his neck.

Later, he’d wonder what would have happened if he’d just lied, spewed some bullshit about how Marge is quiet, a good girl for him until she forgets to be. It doesn’t matter because it’s not what happens.

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The next time Gale finds himself in a seedy bar, courtesy of one John Egan, he catches his eyes on the dance floor. They hadn’t talked about that morning again and Gale had hoped that Bucky forgot all about it. A naive notion, perhaps but one that helps him sleep at night. He can’t help but watch that assumption die a painful death though when Bucky holds his gaze, hand following the curve of the woman’s spine that is currently clinging to him. Gale looks away, pushes the toothpick from one corner of his mouth to the other and continues to chew on it.
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He's almost surprised when Bucky appears at his side a little bit later, half expecting him to just leave with the girl, currently twirling on the dance floor with a different fellow.

"You gotta watch and learn, Buck." His breath smells like alcohol and Gale can see a sheen of sweat glistening on his throat in the low light. "I wouldn't want to be responsible when your missus is disappointed on your big night."

Gale's heart starts racing as Bucky so carelessly and easily picks at his insecurities. He tries his best to swallow his nerves. "You sure you ought to be the one I'm learning from?" He asks but Bucky grins at him, their shoulders brushing in the crowded room.

"Haven't gotten any complaints yet," he says, voice dropping low and a smirk spreading on his face that has Gale shake his head with a huffed laugh. It's true that the women love John and he loves them equally as much, courting them all evening, throwing winks around and teasing the laughter out of them.

"Listen," John says, dropping his voice to a whisper. "It's like anything else. You ain't gonna be good at it the first time around. Hell, I lasted no more than three seconds probably." Gale really wishes that Bucky hadn't conjured up the image of him, spilling over a girl's thighs or perhaps into his underwear, cheeks colored pink with embarrassment. "You gotta practice, Buck. Think about it."

Gale is about to tell him how he's certainly not gonna go around cheating on Marge but before he can say anything Bucky has pushed away from the bar again, rejoining the girl he'd left earlier. She spins away from the fella who'd been entertaining her in the meantime and Bucky throws a respectful nod at him, even as he grins like the cat that got the cream.

Gale watches as he spins her - at least he knows how to dance, although he doesn't like doing it much either. It's almost like he feels strangers' eyes on them, wondering what they get up to in the dark of the night. Wherever they go, Marge and him usually get compliments for being such a perfect couple. He wonders if they would still think that way if they knew Gale had never taken much of an initiative. That it was her that had asked to meet him after school one day, her who had curled a hand into his shirt and pulled him into a kiss - the first for both of them.

Meanwhile, Bucky finds his gaze across the bar before lowering his

head, lips finding the woman's exposed shoulder and trailing featherlight kisses up the side of her neck until his lips are next to her ear. Gale stares, feeling frozen, knowing he's intruding but unable to help it. *Watch and learn*, Bucky had said and even though Gale knows what he means, knows that he should if he doesn't want to be a disappointment, shame curls in his gut regardless. It feels wrong to watch Bucky's hand splayed out on the small of her back, watch him sink his teeth into her earlobe before saying something that's impossible to catch over the noise.

Gale swallows, gaze dropping to the stained bar counter as he shifts in his seat and is glad to not be drinking. Who knows what he would have done or what he would have said.

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Marge pulls him into their bedroom, fingers pulling at his jacket. *This is it,* Gale thinks, *the real thing.* His hands don't shake when his fingers smooth down Marge's back but he can't deny that his heart is racing for all the wrong reasons.

She's impatient and Gale can't really do anything as she pushes his jacket off his shoulders and starts to unbutton his shirt. His eyes flutter shut as he feels her smooth hand wandering down his chest. "Been waiting a long time to do this," she whispers, her sweet voice all wrong in his ears as countless memories resurface and tears prick at Gale's eyes. *This is it,* he reminds himself, *this is what you want.*

"Yeah, me too," he says, hoping that she thinks he sounds choked up because of the desire.

"Get me out of this dress then," she says and spins in front of him. Gale feels something akin to relief and then feels sick to his stomach with it. She's twitching under his fingers as he eases the zipper down, hands nervously pulling at the fabric of her dress, smoothing her hair behind her ear and Gale's heart hurts. This is the night that she'd built up so much in her imagination, the night that her sisters and friends and relatives had probably alluded to with dreamy looks in their eyes.

And here Gale stands and he knows to push her dress down, fumbles with the bra for a moment and tries not to think about why the mechanics of that particular piece elude him. He knows to pull her against his chest and let his hand wander down her stomach, feeling her quivering breath. Gale hides his face in her neck as his fingers dip between her thighs, feeling the unfamiliar wetness.
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In Bucky's defense, he actually did teach him a lot. His breath hits the side of Gale's neck as he curls around him from behind and brings up their right hands in front of them.

"Go slow," he instructs, the deep timbre of his voice making Gale's neck prickle. He watches, heart racing in his chest as Bucky's palm presses to the back of his hand, finger on finger.

"You're gonna use your middle and ring finger to stroke her. Like this." Bucky's fingers curl upwards and Gale watches as his little finger curls with them, inherent reflexes kicking in. He tries to flatten it out, making his fingers shake with the effort and he huffs a laugh at it, Bucky's chuckle in his ear.

"Don't worry too much about it. It'll rest against her outside while you stroke inwards," Bucky explains and Gale bites his lip, staring at their fingers and breathing heavily. Bucky's fingers start to slowly curl and uncurl. When Gale pushes into his hand, his fingers mirror the movement.

"That's it," Bucky mumbles, thumb hooking around Gale's palm and moving it to his chest. "Make sure she's nice and wet for you. Kiss her neck, tell her how much you *love* her and want to have her in your bed every night." Gale drags in a deep breath, hoping that John can't hear how hard his heart is beating in his chest, grateful it's his own palm trapped against his chest.

"Kiss her breasts, run your fingers up her thighs, do all of those things you've been dreaming of," Bucky mumbles and Gale squeezes his eyes shut but the only thing behind his eyelids is an image of Bucky curled over his shoulder. The way he must look watching his own hand pushing Gale's down, smoothing over his stomach, coming to rest at his waist band. "I want you to tease her, pass past the golden price three times until you dip your fingers in and then once more. But oh when you do…" Bucky's free hand comes to rest on Gale's hip, stabilizing him.

Gale's breath hitches, every muscle in his body tensing as Bucky pushes on, Gale's palm dragging past his stirring cock, down and down between his legs. "Ask her to spread her legs for you." Bucky says and his voice is rough, right in Gale's ear. He's not sure when he started sweating but is overly aware of the fact that he is now. His cock is hardening in his pants and he tries not to think about it, tries
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to ignore the fact that Bucky has to notice with his palm right there, still covering Gale's.

He feels his balls through the fabric and shifts, stance widening to accommodate their palms wandering lower. There should be too much fabric between their fingers and his skin but Gale feels electrified, his skin crawling. When Bucky curls their middle and ring fingers, Gale's fingertips touch the fabric behind his balls and he grits his teeth against the gasp crawling out of his throat.

"Make sure she enjoys herself," Bucky tells him, voice husky.

Bucky's fingers move, stroking back and forth against the fabric between his legs, pushing it against Gale's overly sensitive skin. He's never been this turned on in his life and if it wasn't for Bucky's sure grip on his hip, he's not sure he'd still be standing. It's easy to tell with men, of course, his hard cock projecting his arousal to the world around him but women are different and Bucky had already told him to get her wet. "How?" He gasps out, blood rushing in his ears.

"Listen to her moaning your name." Bucky's grip on him tightens. If he'd changed the octave of his voice, had mocked a woman's tone then, maybe they wouldn't have ended up where they did, maybe it wouldn't have mattered at all. Either way, when Bucky says, "*Gale,"* low and hungry, like he's starving for him, Gale can feel his cock dripping precum into his underwear and he's pushing into their hands, aching for more, his skin prickling with the anticipation of something, a touch of a hand that's not his own.

It's all it takes for Bucky's honestly admirable patience in that moment to snap and push Gale's hand out of the way to cup his balls in his hand. It's not something Gale's ever even done to himself, his movements efficient and functional when getting himself off, in the dark of the night under his covers.

This is anything but. The light bright even through Gale's eyelids and him standing in the middle of the room, legs spread for Bucky who is touching him shamelessly now, thumb drawing a half circle over the fabric, brushing against his hard cock and the wet spot that's forming on it.

A drop of sweat slides down Gale's neck and he feels like he's burning up. Perhaps this is what the preacher meant when he talked about the heat the hellfire carries. Gale can't bring himself to fight it, head lolling to the side helplessly and finding John's shoulder behind him.

Still, he should tell him that he's losing track of why they're here, get him to be the one to stop.

"*Bucky*," he breathes, shocked at his own neediness that's seeping through his voice. It's not the reminder he'd intended it to be. More a sigh than anything else and he hears a sharp intake of breath behind him.

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Marge fingernails are digging into his shoulder blades, her blonde hair fanning out over the pillow. Gale can feel the iron grip of her thighs on his hips and tries desperately to think, to figure out how to ease her nerves. He's suspended above her, cock pushed against her tight muscles.

"You okay?" He asks, feeling panic rise in him. He can't do this, he doesn't know what to do. It was never like this- it was never- He grits his teeth against the memory of John's enthusiastic moans, his head thrown back eagerly against dirty floors, barn walls, a cheap motel bed once.

"Hurts," she admits, face scrunched up in pain.

"We- uhm. We don't have to," he suggests, hesitatingly, afraid to upset her. This is what she's been waiting for the past ten years - God, had it really been that long since she'd taken his hand on the schoolyard?

Instead though, Marge nods enthusiastically. "Yeah, let's-" He pushes off of her, both of them letting out a sigh of relief.

"We can work up to it," Gale ensures them both.

"Yeah."

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There's a thousand excuses and then a million more. Gale doesn't let himself realize that until it's much too late though. At first, it's like that. Bucky talking him through how to touch a woman, drawing the outline a vagina on Gale's skin with his fingertips, telling him to touch here and lick there. Bucky teasing his nipples through his shirt. Bucky letting him mark his entire chest until he strikes the balance between teeth and tongue, pain and pleasure. Later he'd learn that the way Bucky preferred it was a lot rougher than Marge liked it. But that was years away still.

It's not that Gale hadn't seen the way Bucky would press his fingers into the bruises he'd leave over and over again or hadn't noticed the look in John's eyes when he'd touched Gale afterwards, always lingering. It's just that Bucky always knew why this had started and where it would inevitably end.

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Gale almost doesn't show up the first time he sees Bucky after the wedding but Marge had pressed a kiss to his temple and told him to meet up with his best friend. He almost turns around again when he sees the length of John leaning against the counter. He's in civilian clothes but the leather jacket is still present.

Gale's stomach makes a valiant effort to turn inside out as he realizes that every bruise he's left on him has healed by now and he's not at liberty to leave new ones. Never again. Everything he wants is waiting at home for him and he's here, sidling up to his best friend at the bar, ordering a ginger beer.

They make small talk about work but it feels so hollow. Gale hasn't felt this far from John since Stalag Luft. It's like they're puppets performing this scene for an invisible audience. Neither of them can break character even though none of this makes any fucking sense.

Bucky slinks away eventually and Gale doesn't stop him. When he watches him dance with some girl and drop kisses along her neck, Bucky's gaze doesn't go looking for him. Gale doesn't realize what he's doing until the bartender stands in front of him.

"Sir, what can I get you? Another ginger beer?"

"No." Bucky's fingers curl into the back of her dress, hitching the skirt up in the process. "Whisky, please."

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Gale lets Bucky do almost everything before he lets him kiss him. There's no good excuse to, in the beginning. Gale knows how to kiss a girl. It's the one thing that he and Marge have done an abundance of.

Bucky keeps asking though. *You sure?* He asks almost every time, thumb catching on Gale's chin. *Seen plenty fellas brag about their kissing and then have girls make faces behind their backs.* He keeps goading Gale until one day when he says *prove it*, Gale grabs his face and kisses him instead of telling him to mind his business.

It's strange right away in a different way than all of these other things they do. Here he has something to compare it to and Bucky tastes so vastly different to Marge. His mustache prickles Gale's skin, catching on his own stubble. Marge is sweet and soft under Gale's mouth and it always takes him a while before he works up the courage to lick into her mouth. Bucky however immediately presses back against him, hands on Gale's waist and mouth opening beneath him.

It's easy to lose control of the heat it elicits, cascading into an avalanche of desire with Gale's tongue in Bucky's mouth and their heavy breathing filling the silence. There's something else though, nagging at Gale's mind and it doesn't come into focus until much later when his lips are sore and there's straw in Bucky's hair but somehow miraculously they're still clothed, lips never straying far from each other before returning.

It's not just that Bucky is different from Marge - of course he is, all hard muscles and large hands and deep sounds that escape his throat. It's also Gale. He knows they need to leave just based on the darkness outside the barn but Bucky's lips keep beckoning him back. He could lie here for hours just kissing him and he already has. It's a startling realization, the first of many signs of true danger looming at the horizon that Gale turned his back to willingly.

It was never like that with Marge. Gale enjoys kissing her but he hadn't known it could be like *this*. Bucky grins at him dazedly, lips bitten and a lazy smirk on his face.

"Not bad, huh?" He asks and Gale looks at him and tries to recall what they used to be to each other. Best friends. Brothers in arms.

Bucky's eyes are bright as he looks up at him but Gale can't help his gaze dropping back to his lips and before he knows it, he's pulled him into another kiss by the nape of his neck. An edge of desperation added to the movement of his lips as he rolls on top of him and savors the taste.

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Gale has tried multiple times to pinpoint the moment in which he should have known. Perhaps it's that second time; the first time after Bucky pushed his hands away too short and hazy for anything to process. All it had taken was Bucky reaching for the button of Gale's slacks and he'd spilled into his underwear with a muffled gasp, feeling wetness soaking through his pants. When he'd pushed away, he'd
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pretended not to notice the bulge in Bucky's pants. They'd been talking about women, it's only normal.

That second time though, Bucky spins him around to face him and presses him against the wall of the supply room. He says something about pretending that he's a woman, that it'll help him avoid an embarrassing performance once it's the real deal. Gale squeezes his eyes shut but his hands find Bucky's shoulders anyway, digging into the muscles as Bucky's hand pushes into his pants and starts to jerk him off.

In hindsight, he should've known when the strength with which Bucky holds him up turns him on, should've known when Bucky's breathless, raspy, "that's it, Buck, that's it," makes him moan and spill over his hand.

He definitely should've known when he starts wondering what Bucky looks like with his face twisted up in pleasure the next day. He manages to dismiss all of it though as the idle curiosity and desperation of someone inexperienced. It would be so much more and so much better once he gets to do these things with Marge. He only starts doubting that after becoming addicted to Bucky's bitten lips.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> Whisky is the only proven remedy against Gale's incessant need to kiss him. So he drinks and Bucky's quiet.
>
> Nothing is as it should be.

Chapter Notes

> Thank you for the many kind responses. I had a blast reading them. I hope you enjoy this second chapter - a bit of a ride if I do say so myself.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Marge loves to go on walks with him and it's one of the simple things that make Gale feel like he hasn't totally failed at being a husband.

She asks about John. A pit forms in Gale's stomach like always. Will he forever be caught in this dance? Bucky's hurt eyes and Marge's oblivious ones? How can he keep a secret of this magnitude for the rest of his life? It doesn't matter because he will have to.

"He's doing alright, I think," Gale says when the truth is that he has no idea. They meet up every two or three weeks but rarely talk about anything of substance. Bucky eyes Gale's drink dubiously but never says anything. Whisky is the only proven remedy against Gale's incessant need to kiss him. So he drinks and Bucky's quiet.

Nothing is as it should be.

"Good." Marge smiles at him, her hand patting his arm where it's linked with hers. "You two are really living the dream, coming home safe and sound-"

The rest of her words are drowned out by the barking of a dog. Gale can see it, straining against the leash of its owner, spit dripping from its snout. He grabs Marge on instinct, pushing her behind himself. "Steady now," he orders. He can feel his blood rushing in his ears as he pushes Marge off the path, through the underbrush. It's a good enough spot and he pushes Marge down, hovering over her and keeping an eye on the path. He'd rather see the enemy approach than be shot in the back.

“Gale! Gale! Stop!” Marge shouts, the sound of it slowly filtering in.

“Shhh, shhh. You have to stay quiet,” he tells her, suddenly aware of her struggling against his grip.

“We are in the park, Gale! Let me go!” She pulls from his grip at last as her words process.

Gale looks left and right. They are at the park. Not rural Germany, running from the Nazis. He blinks and realizes how rumbled she looks. Twigs in her hair, dress torn in places, fear in her eyes as she rubs her arm where he’d grabbed her. When his gaze drops to follow her movements, he sees finger-shaped bruises starting to bloom.

Now you’re just like your father.

“What was that?” Marge asks quietly.

Gale turns away. He can’t keep looking at her. “I- I need to- I need to go,” he says and when he comes to again, he’s at the bar, empty glass in front of him and the taste of whisky in his mouth. It’s not supposed to be like this. He’d always kept it together in the prison camp. He would never judge his men for wavering, had never held it against Bucky but still. It hadn’t been him. He’s back now. He has what he always wanted. Why then is he suddenly here, scared out of his mind of himself?

How can he explain himself to Marge? And how can he promise her that it’ll never happen again?

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The prison camp is where they unravel in a sense. There’s less privacy than at Thorpe Abbotts, somehow and Gale is quick to realize that the John he’d sent to London is not the same that arrives at his camp. There’s relief at first. For about two weeks, Gale finds himself batting his fingers away, pushing him out of his bunk bed until all the others are paired up as well, shivering in the bitter cold winter of ‘43.

Bucky doesn’t talk about what happened but Gale sees him wipe at his cheek idly sometimes. He doesn’t ask either though, figuring that Bucky would come to him when he was ready. He’s very wrong about that. He’s wrong about a lot of things.

Then, before he can change his mind about it, something in Bucky shifts. Or perhaps, it breaks.
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He sees him staring at the fence, talking about escaping but what really scares him is the look in his eyes. There's no light behind them anymore.

Gale keeps an eye on it, promises the Colonel that he has it under control. Silently, he prays that it's just a fluke, just Bucky struggling to settle into this new routine. It doesn't get better though. It gets worse. It makes Gale reconsider his decision to refrain from touching him beyond enemy lines. When he invents a circumstance to clear the room for two hours and presses Bucky against the wall that's impossible to see from the windows and kisses him, the man weeps. Then he pushes Gale away.

They fight a lot. They've never fought like this before. Bucky doesn't talk to him for days, then doesn't leave him alone. He goads Gale into hitting him one too many times, no matter how often he apologizes and he just can't figure out what the hell is wrong with him. It is this place and what was done to him before he got here but Bucky is taking it worse than the others and it only shows up aggressively in front of Gale. He just can't get through to him.

Nothing about the night is different when he catches Bucky. Gale just wakes up, an ache in his stomach and he wanders outside. It will become his most frequent recurring nightmare. Not waking up that night, not walking outside or not seeing Bucky wandering towards the fence and hearing German officers egging him on. They are hungry for his blood, dogs barking at their leashes already. Gale has never run as fast as he did that night, not even when he was leaving John behind, bullets whizzing around his head.

The others are asleep so he takes the opportunity to confront Bucky afterwards, after he's pulled him away from the barbed wire and cocked guns. Fear and desperation claw at his throat. If he'd stepped out even a minute later, there would have been nothing left but Bucky's corpse, blood seeping into the mud.

"Bucky, please, tell me what's wrong. *Please*." Gale Cleven hasn't begged since he was 7, when he'd realized that it would never make a difference to someone else's actions. He's begging now with the fervent desperation of a sinner at confession.

"What should be wrong, Buck?" Bucky tells him. "We'll get out of here or I'll die here. Either way, you'll go home when you do. There's nothing left for you to climb into a B-17 for. Looks like they're winning this war without us anyway and you have something to go

home to. Your life will go on."

"So will yours," Gale says, knowing he'd said something like this to Bucky over and over since they got here.

"No, Gale," Bucky says quietly. "My life will be marrying Marjorie Spencer and having beautiful blonde children with her."

Gale looks at him, blinks, opens his mouth. They knew this. This has always been the plan. "What am I supposed to do with that?" He asks instead because what does Bucky want him to do about it? Not marry her? To do what? The only way Bucky will ever stand in front of that altar with him will be as his best man.

Bucky shakes his head and looks away. "Carry on, Buck. Not like you didn't know this." There's a crooked smile on his mouth and Gale wants to scream but instead he says nothing. He'd wake someone or alert the guards and anyway. It wouldn't change a thing. Perhaps he's wrong about that, too.

Bucky looks at him and Gale finally understands what he's been missing. The realization that had haunted Bucky and turned him into a ghost wandering around the camp. *I love you. It changes nothing.*

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Gale tries to talk to Marge about what happened in Germany but never finds the words. She asks and he can see that it hurts her when he shrugs her off. There are no words though and they'd been lucky. All of them. Buck had talked to Rosie, had heard from his own mouth what he'd seen when he'd gone down east of Berlin. So he doesn't talk about it because how would Marge be able to understand what it was like, to have a roof over your head and a little bit of food in your stomach and still feel the fear sitting on your throat every day and every night.

So instead of telling her, he lies awake, stares at their bedroom ceiling until he can't take it anymore. He grows sick of the itching in his bones on those nights, swings his legs over the edge of the bed and tiptoes out of the room.

It's cold outside, the wind digging into the crevices of Gale's sheepskin as he starts to wander the streets. He pulls his scarf up and it's oddly soothing despite how much it reminds him of being in that damn prison camp.
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The impression only intensifies when there's another figure wandering the streets. Gale would recognize that beanie anywhere. Head tipped back, staring at the stars. Gale knows that Bucky hears him approach - they've been at war too long to not be overly aware of someone invading their personal space in the dead of the night.

"Quiet night, huh?" Gale says and when Bucky turns his head to him and smiles, it's almost like they never shipped out. Like they're still boys on Texan soil, tussling and laughing and not carrying the weight of the world.

"Perfect to steal a plane," Bucky says, recalling the night they had decided the sky was too clear, too beautiful to not be flying through it. They hadn't gotten far, of course, failing at breaking into one of the B-17s they had stationed for practice. Still, they'd climbed on the wing and Bucky had been almost uncharacteristically quiet as Gale pointed out stars and their constellations to him.

"I think they'd let us now," Gale points out. Especially the kids on base treat them weirdly. *War heroes*, that term gets thrown around a lot. Gale doesn't feel like a hero, especially not here, in the middle of the night when he should be in bed with his wife. Actually, especially not here where he takes a step closer to Bucky and his eyes that have a rare light in them.

He's not going to be the kind of guy that cheats on his wife. He's not going to be the kind of guy that spews some bullshit about how much the war changed him as an excuse for leaning in and tasting the forbidden fruit. He'd made a promise even before. Still, for a moment he looks up at Bucky and lets himself remember what it was like to kiss him.

It's funny, Gale thinks. The way things are with Bucky. They are just standing there, breath rising in big white blooms but when he tilts his head back and looks at him, he can picture the way Bucky's hands used to cradle his face, the way he'd look at Gale with wide eyes like he can't quite believe he's real before fitting his lips to his. It's funny because suddenly Gale's pulse is racing and his fingers twitch to reach out where they are buried deep in his pockets.

"No fun if they just hand us the keys," Bucky points out, turning away, eyes looking down the empty street of the neighborhood.

Gale knows that he has everything he's ever wanted but he feels strangely lonely here, in the safety of an American suburb with his

wife waiting for him in his bed. God, *his wife*. The one that looks at him like she wishes she could get back the man he used to be.

This will be the version of you worth knowing, he'd said to Bucky once upon a time. Nothing but an empty phrase because the people who knew Gale before he went to war, don't recognize him and those who get to know him now only see half of him. The darker half.

There's only one man that he trusts to see all of him and he was there for all of it.

It's like the rest of the world is turned upside down and the only thing that makes sense is Bucky. He wonders if this is what Bucky felt like in the camps. Who knows what Bucky would end up doing now that they are back, now that there is a future to be lived. Gale's is laid out for him. He made sure to get every box on the list checked. He doesn't understand why he feels like he's drowning then.

"Gale?" He's torn from his thoughts by Bucky's careful question. They haven't talked about what it's like to be back, not since the wedding, certainly not since Gale saw Bucky's face shatter when someone called Marge 'Mrs Cleven' in front of him for the first time. So he doesn't find the words now either, has never been good with them when it came to stuff like this, really. He just knows that everything is closing in and he's not sure he'll ever get out of here alive.

The only thing he can think of doing is stepping closer, killing the distance between them and burying his face in Bucky's chest and there's the even *thumb, thumb, thumb* of Bucky heart under his ear and he's alive and they are both alive and Gale doesn't know why but he's suddenly crying.

Bucky's arms wrap around him and he doesn't say anything and that's new, too but that's okay. Neither of them came back exactly the same and here in the middle of the night and in front of each other, they don't have to pretend that they did.

Don't leave me, Gale wants to say, *I don't know who I am anymore when you aren't looking at me.*

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Before Bucky leaves for Thorpe Abbots, they all go out together. Him and Marge and Bucky and a girl that Marge had met on her last visit. He wraps his arm around her shoulders and pretends not to watch Bucky's hands low on the girl's waist.
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Gale kisses Marge long and deep before they say goodbye in front of the hotel she's staying at. He's surprised to find Bucky back in his bunk below Gale's. (They'd given him the top bunk originally but after Bucky fell off the ladder for the third time in as many days, Gale had forced him to move down.)

"Thought you were staying out," Gale tells him now, shrugging his jacket off. Bucky is stretched out on his bunk, one arm folded behind his head, the other holding a baseball magazine.

"I could say the same to you," Bucky points out and Gale catches his eyes, the magazine coming to rest on his chest. *More interesting than baseball to you, huh.*

"Marge was tired."

"No trying out those new skills then, I'll take it." Fire licks down Gale's spine immediately and when he looks into Bucky's eyes, dark and unwavering, he thinks he should have known when he walked in and saw him stretched out on his bunk.

It had only happened once or twice, Bucky recounting adventures without Gale's prompting and offering up lessons that somehow end with Bucky's hand in his pants. Gale swallows. "Not married yet, Bucky," Gale reminds him and he means, *we're not married so we are not having sex yet* but it also sounds like an excuse. *Not married yet, Bucky, so if there's anything you want to do… now's the time.*

He walks over then, one hand leaning against his bunk as he looks down at Bucky, makes sure he's understanding this right. Bucky is watching him, licks his lips and Gale's heart is in his throat. He doesn't know why his hands tremble and his heart races but he doesn't want to run for the hills in the way he does when Marge pushes his hand from her waist to her hip. So he stands there, watching Bucky. He's the one that leads these moments, deciding on another lesson.

"You ever given her a hickey?" Bucky asks then and Gale slowly shakes his head. "Well, Major Cleven, I don't think I can leave you here to say goodbye to your woman without teaching you this vital skill."

Gale feels a flush creep up his neck, his whole body starting to heat up because this time he's pretty certain he knows where this is going even if their intentions are pure. The fact that Bucky reaches out and pulls him down onto the bunk with him only confirms that.

It's awkward for a moment, their long limbs bumping into each other but Gale swings his leg over Bucky's because he's pretty certain that it's what you're supposed to do and Bucky's grin makes him feel like he did the right thing.

Bucky reaches up then, fingers finding the buttons of his own shirt that he starts to undo. "You'll want it to be visible, of course but for the sake of the lesson, this'll do."

Gale stares at the exposed skin of Bucky's shoulder, the flat chest revealed in front of him. The dusting of dark hair, here and there. It feels daunting but he supposes that is why they are here, to teach Gale and have it be less overwhelming. He swallows, avoiding Bucky's gaze.

"Nothing but a bruise, Buck, c'mon, give it your worst. I promise I can take it." There's a bit of tension in Bucky's voice and Gale wonders whether he's scared of what Gale might do or whether he actually wanted to spend this night elsewhere and the girl hadn't let him. Something twists in Gale's stomach at the thought of being John Egan's second choice of entertainment for the night.

Gale leans forward and fits his mouth over the muscle on Bucky's shoulder, heart racing and fingers twisting in his own pants to stop himself from reaching out and making it weird.

Bucky smells like whisky but this close, Gale can catch a hint of sweat on him, too. He's pressed kisses to Marge's cheek and neck at times but he knows that there's more to leaving a mark behind. He opens his mouth slightly and his teeth graze over Bucky's skin. Bruise, he'd said so Gale bites down hard.

Bucky hisses above him, fingers finding his forearms and squeezing until Gale pulls back, eyeing the imprint of his teeth critically.

"Jesus I thought you were gonna take a bite out of me there," Bucky admits and hot embarrassment flushes through Gale.

"You didn't tell me how to do it!" He protests. "What else am I meant to do with 'it's just a bruise'?" Gale clings to the anger because he fears what would happen if he'd let the embarrassment win. "Aren't you supposed to teach me?!"

Bucky stares at him for a long moment before shaking his head. "Okay well- don't do it like that. It's not a bite. It's like- it's easier if I just show you." Bucky reaches up and starts undoing the buttons of Gale's

shirt.

The anger immediately washes away and breathing gets harder as Bucky's fingers brush against Gale's naked skin. They've never undressed for this, not even partially and Gale is thankful that Bucky stops in the middle of his chest, simply pushing his shirt open wide.

"Everyone is different but it doesn't take *that* much." Gale can hear the hint of teasing in his voice and huffs a laugh despite his nerves.

It doesn't matter anyway because next thing he knows Bucky's lips are on his chest and he can feel the prickle of his mustache. Bucky sucks a little of his skin in and it doesn't hurt at all even at the barest hint of teeth scraping along Gale's skin. He's more preoccupied with the feeling of Bucky's tongue against his skin.

It's over way too quickly, Bucky leaning back with spit shining on his lips and his eyes trained on Gale's chest. He can hear the loud thumping of his heart, the twist of nerves in his stomach and the incessant *do I like this is this good can he do it again* that swirls through his mind. Bucky reaches out, thumb digging into the spot where he'd fit his mouth. There's a slight twinge but it barely cuts through the chatter in Gale's brain.

"No need to be aggressive," Bucky mumbles and looks up at him. His blue eyes shining in the darkness below Gale's own bunk is enough to rip him from his thoughts. "Unless-" Bucky's finger curls, fingernail digging into Gale's bruised skin. This time he can feel the twinge zapping through his body but it's not unpleasant. "Unless you want to be."

Gale's gaze slips to the imprint of his teeth slowly turning purple and red. He'd left those. His mark on Bucky's skin. It's weirdly exhilarating to think that when Bucky gets over there tomorrow, he'd carry a piece of Gale with him. When, inevitably, he'd pick up some poor typist on his first night there, drunk on joining a war on the right side, she'd see the mark unless Bucky goes out of his way to hide it.

It's the thought of Bucky pushing her hands off his shirt buttons that gets him to lean in, to try again. He fits his open mouth Bucky's chest this time, just below his left collarbone and sucks at the skin, tongue flicking against it teasingly. When he pulls back, there's a flush going up Bucky's neck and it feels like beating his time to get into the cockpit of a B-17. Better even and so Gale leans in again, sucking a matching bruise on the other side of his chest.

“You can use some teeth,” Bucky mumbles, chin slightly tilted upwards and his eyes intent on Gale.

Gale - ever the eager student - implements his feedback, teeth digging into skin again and maybe this one had been too high up and using a little too much teeth, the skin bruising rapidly. “Too much?” He asks but when he looks up at Bucky’s eyes his pupils are blown wide with desire.

It makes Gale remember that Bucky is shipping out tomorrow and as much as they like to joke about these things, being involved in combat does mean they can get shot down. Bucky is a damn good pilot, one of the best but the thought still makes him a little reckless, hands finding Bucky’s waist instead of keeping them to himself as he has been.

“Just a tad,” Bucky mumbles with the tone that Gale is learning means he’s turned on.

Gale hesitates, knowing the words that are sitting behind his clenched teeth, knowing that they could be innocuous enough but have everything to do with the heat coursing through him and nothing at all with the thought of saying goodbye to Marge. Usually, Buck Cleven would turn tail here, would shake his head and remember his manners. Men like him can’t make mistakes like this, mistakes like John Egan aren’t ever forgiven. And yet, perhaps for the first time in his life Gale wants something more than he wants to be good. “Show me?” He asks.

Chapter End Notes

> Now we've really got him unraveling! This really came together quite fluently despite the non-linear style because it allows me to draw these great parallels between what Bucky is going through and what Gale goes through. Looking forward to hearing what y'all think!
>
> Find me on tumblr: Nici Jones

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

> “Shame I’m not a girl, huh?”
>
> It makes Gale flush with shame because he doesn’t want Bucky to be a girl, not really. So much of what makes it so impossible for Gale to keep his hands to himself around him are his broad shoulders and strong muscles and coarse body hair but he also knows what Bucky means. There’s no world where he’d stay with Marge if Bucky was a girl and Gale would feel about her the way he feels about Bucky.

Chapter Notes

> Hello, welcome back. I wanted to post this yesterday but here we are. I hope you'll be happy to hear that this is a longer chapter. The mess is really getting... messy here. Strap in y'all.
>
> **Emetophobia** warning for this chapter btw

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first time the lie slips past his lips, Gale should have known it was a slippery slope. But then again he hadn’t told Marge about the drinking either, making sure to chew gum the whole way home from the bar and brush his teeth as soon as he got there.

So what’s one more lie?

“Bucky isn’t feeling well,” he tells Marge, shrugging on his sheepskin.

“Oh? Should I make some soup? We could bring it over together?” Marge offers. She’s always tried her best to get along with Bucky - knowing that she can’t have Gale without him - but he’s known her for most of her life and he can tell she doesn’t approve of him and his impulsiveness.

“No, I- I don’t think it’s like that,” Gale says, nausea twisting his stomach at the lie (still, that wouldn’t last much longer either). It’s not Bucky that jumps at invisible shadows falling through the windows today. Gale just doesn’t feel safe in their house, like he’s about to claw his own skin off.

He needs someone to watch his six and perhaps, he needs to look at Bucky's face some more and remember what he left behind in the war.

"Ah. I see." Marge smoothes out the dress - she tries so hard to be the perfect wife for him and that makes him sick, too. He hasn't been able to touch her in weeks and the idea of kissing her feels increasingly difficult. At least if she cheats on him, he could have a reason to hate her but he knows full well that she never would.

He's growing less sure about himself by the day.

None of that manages to stop him. He kisses her cheek and turns up the collar of his jacket against the wind to make his way down the street. They settled in the same neighborhood of subsidized housing for veterans near the airbase.

When Gale gets to Bucky's house, he interrupts him in the middle of doing the dishes, a baseball game on the radio and an easy smile on his face. It's a good day for him and Gale feels even worse for the lie he'd given Marge.

They chat idly, mostly Bucky talking to him about the game - it's a replay and he manages to predict every move by memory. It's a small comfort but it doesn't make the weight on Gale's chest go away as he watches Bucky, moving around his kitchen effortlessly and wishes, too, he would give Gale a reason to hate him.

Instead, Gale gets up and starts drying the dishes, to keep his hands busy, to get closer to Bucky, who's to tell? And Bucky takes another look at him but doesn't say anything. It's gotten a bit easier since that night when Gale cried in his arms but that doesn't mean they talk about it. Not the war or them or anything in between those things.

Bucky splashes him with the soapy water and Gale hits him with the towel and when Bucky wraps his arms around Gale's waist, he realizes he can't remember the last time he laughed like this and then he remembers why. He lies to his wife. He drinks himself into a stupor. Half of his men never even got a chance to have what he has and still, he is here, ruining it all.

Bucky keeps his arms around him as he sobs, helpless and without abandon.

They lie on Bucky bed - a queen-size, broad enough for two - once the tears dry up. There's so much left to cry about but Gale is tired and he wishes he could just go to sleep forever instead of thinking about this.

“Bad day, huh?” Bucky asks. They’re lying face to face but their bodies aren’t touching. It’s the first time Bucky has acknowledged that he knows Gale isn’t doing well. He supposes it doesn’t take a genius to figure out and Bucky does know him best.

“Yeah,” Gale answers quietly.

“You can stay here as long as you want,” Bucky offers and there’s honest concern in his eyes. Is this how he’d looked at John in the prison camp? It’s a sweet offer but all it makes him think about is the easy domesticity in the kitchen earlier, Bucky’s easy grin, Gale’s own laughter and he knows that if he were to take Bucky up on the offer, he’d never leave again.

The realization sinks heavy in his chest, like lead in water.

He reaches out then, fitting his hand to Bucky’s cheek in a way he’d done a hundred times over but hadn’t allowed himself to, not since the night of the ceasefire. It’s achingly clear here, with his face against the pillow that carries a smell so familiar and comforting it could only belong to home. He hadn’t wanted to see it, had always brushed it off because it never would make a difference and perhaps if he ignored the million signs and the ache in his chest it would somehow disappear on its own.

Gale’s thumb traces Bucky’s chin as the ache pounds with ferocity in his ribcage.

“Gale,” Bucky mumbles and pushes his hand away, rolling away to look up at the ceiling instead. He traces the steady rise and fall of Bucky’s chest, marvels at the fact that they both made it out alive and it still doesn’t make a fucking difference.

“Shame I’m not a girl, huh?” Gale mumbles, echoing John’s word from a lifetime ago.

When Bucky’s head turns there is a furious look in his eyes. “You do *not* get to say that to me.”

Gale wants to tell him that it’s both their faults but he swallows the blame like he takes a punch. Silently and without flinching.

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When Bucky makes it back to Thorpe Abbotts after Germany, Gale can tell that everyone is happy to have their Major back, but mainly they
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are happy for them to be reunited. Later, Croz would tell them that they were both unbearable without each other - each of them in their own way. Gale tries his best not to read into it.

There's a fleeting thought about how - if at all - they were going to continue this thing between them but the wondering dies a sudden death when Bucky shakes his hand on the tarmac and every inch between them aches.

There's not much war left to fight but Gale had stuck around after returning from Germany anyway, waiting for Bucky to return, telling himself that he'd go home to Marge then. Instead, he finds himself selfishly and with a sickness in his stomach wishing for the Germans to hold out a little longer or perhaps for commando to force them to stay beyond the bitter end. He knows just as well that neither of those things are likely to happen so he pulls Bucky away that night - recklessly obvious in front of their men - and asks him to fuck him.

They do it in Gale's new plane, Bucky's face full of wonder as Gale kisses him and puts the jar of vaseline into his hands. There's no excuse for this and they both know it. Yet, Gale can't help but feel like this is the most important lesson he learns from Bucky: the look on his face that night when he pushes into Gale, their fingers entwined and their lips never straying far from each other.

They fuck almost every night until ceasefire is called a few weeks later, claiming lasting injuries for their limping steps.

The night of the ceasefire, Bucky makes Gale come so hard he cries or perhaps that's the knowledge that come morning light, things would be forever different. It's a line in the sand, of course, but Gale knows he needs to leave this behind in the war, needs to be someone else when there's peace and a future to be lived.

Still that night he doesn't care to hide the marks he leaves on Bucky and when they lie there, late at night or perhaps early in the morning with Gale's fingertips tracing down John's chest, Bucky says those words to him.

"Shame I'm not a girl, huh?"

It makes Gale flush with shame because he doesn't want Bucky to be a girl, not really. So much of what makes it so impossible for Gale to keep his hands to himself around him are his broad shoulders and strong muscles and coarse body hair but he also knows what Bucky means. There's no world where he'd stay with Marge if Bucky was a

girl and Gale would feel about her the way he feels about Bucky.

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The first night that he stays at Bucky's, it's for the better. Bucky doesn't want him to and Gale can tell. For once in his life, Bucky is trying to make it hurt less instead of more.

But Gale tells him that if he leaves now he's going to the bar, not home and he knows he's manipulating him - even if it is the truth - but can't help himself. Not when Bucky gives him the bed and then joins him when he promises not to do anything, to keep his hands to himself.

He lies awake as long as he can, watching the rise and fall of Bucky's chest and marvels at being close to him. When he does fall asleep, his dreams are fragmented, flashes of Bucky's smile and Bucky's blush but none of them dissolve into nightmares.

He tells Marge the next morning that Bucky had been scared and he hadn't wanted to leave him alone. The lies are tasting less and less bitter on his tongue.

A month later, he's spending most nights at Bucky's and pretends he can't read the disappointment on Marge's face. He's stopped drinking and counts that as a win. At night, he wraps his arm around Bucky's waist, drawing new lines into the sand over and over. Bucky lets him and perhaps that's their fatal flaw.

Later, he realizes it's those frequent mornings away from Marge that make him miss it and even when she tells him that she isn't feeling well, he excuses himself. This time Bucky is actually doing badly, having similar bouts of panic and depression that Gale experiences but they both seem to handle them better around each other.

Still, perhaps he shouldn't have gone over to Bucky's that day, perhaps he shouldn't have forgotten in the whirlwind that she'd ever told him she wasn't feeling well. But Gale is too preoccupied with Bucky's scared gaze and takes him on a run, their feet hitting the path between fields rapidly but in unison.

Gale watches Bucky as they come to a stop, dragging in desperate breaths and tipping his head back to the sky.

"Better?" He asks, watching the sweat drip down Bucky's neck.
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Bucky nods then, blinking his eyes open and looking at Gale with a small smile. “Made it out, didn’t we?” And Gale can’t help his own broad smile at that. That they did. No barbed wire fence to stop them anymore.

They both turn away from each other after a long moment of smiling at each other with open fondness, their eyes searching out the horizon. Gale had driven them to the edge of the city and they’d run from there, nothing but wide open fields around them now. He can’t say who moved first in the end but suddenly they’re both standing in the middle of the path and their heavy breathing has nothing to do with their run.

“Just this once,” Bucky whispers, pleads even, and Gale doesn’t tell him that he needs no such promises as he rolls up on his tiptoes and kisses him, eagerly and like a starving man, one hand going into his hair, the other fitting itself to Bucky’s hip.

Bucky kisses him back just as desperately, always having been bad at telling Gale no and preserving them both from pain. That had been Gale's job, he just seems to have left that ability behind in a war that they were told they’d won. They bite into each other, desperately, under a hot noon sun and Gale tries to commit it all to memory and finds he hasn’t forgotten a thing. Not how to touch Bucky to make him sigh and not how hard to sink his teeth into his skin to leave a bruise. Finally, finally marking him as his again.

They walk back to the car silently, both of their running shorts wet from something other than sweat and their hands brushing between them. When he drives home - and he doesn’t think about how *home* is Bucky’s house - Bucky puts his hand on Gale’s naked thigh and he reaches down to entangle their fingers.

That night, Marge tells him that she’s pregnant.

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He lies awake that night, picturing his child growing underneath her heart. He pictures inviting Bucky, his long arms wrapped around a tiny bundle. He thinks about the accusatory eyes of a child looking at her father and knowing he’s disappointing everyone.

He thinks about his own father and how everything he’d done to not be like him led him right here, a cheating husband, a neglectful father.

He pukes into the toilet, heaving until his stomach is empty and then
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some. When he looks up, Marge looks pale in the light, her eyes sad but not furious. She has every right to be. Instead though, she kneels on the tiles next to him, one hand carding through Gale's damp hair. He wishes he was at Bucky's now but feels even worse for thinking that.

"What's going on, Gale?" She asks quietly.

"Nothing," he says, reflexively.

Her frown deepens. Gale looks away, fingers tracing the seam between the tiles on the floor with his fingertip. Bucky would understand. He'd take his face into his hands and kiss him. He'd wrap his arms around Gale until he felt warm again.

Gale makes himself sick thinking about him, sitting across from his pregnant wife in the middle of the night. "I need to go," he says and stands up. The longing in his chest is so overwhelmingly large now that not going feels like the worst outcome in every universe.

"Where?" Marge says, sounding hollow.

"Bucky's." He doesn't even have the decency to lie.

She pushes herself up and now, finally, there's anger on her face. "Bullshit. Do you think I'm stupid? Day in and day out you tell me you're at his place. What are you really doing? Are you cheating on me?"

Gale grits his teeth, looks away.

Marge huffs but when he manages to look back at her, there are tears streaming down her face. "Who?" She asks quietly. Gale stares at her. She's going to be the mother of his child. That's something he can never take back. "Who?!" She asks again, louder and angrier.

"I- I wasn't lying," he says slowly because he owes her that much after all this time. "I really am going to Bucky's when I tell you."

"Then who-" She figures it out embarrassingly quickly. Gale had kind of expected to have to spell it out for her.

"Oh." She looks away. "I always thought I was seeing things. That I was stupid for ever thinking that you might- that you two-" She swallows, wiping her tears and tugging her hair behind her ear. "I should've known. You never did look at me like you looked at him."

Gale doesn't know what to do with that revelation so he doesn't say anything, just watches as his world crumbles.

"You'll sleep on the couch tonight," she tells him. "I need to think. If you're not there tomorrow morning- it's over." He wants to protest, tell her that he wouldn't go over to Bucky's after all of this but the lie gets stuck in his throat. She's right. He would.

So he nods and makes his way to their couch.

The next morning, she sits him down, sad smile on her face but otherwise perfectly put together. "I wish the world was kinder to men like you, Buck." She's never called him that before. He'd always been Gale to her but he supposes it's fitting now. After all, it's Bucky's name that he'd given him, just like Gale had given his to Marge. Marjorie Cleven. Buck Cleven. Bucky Egan.

"But it isn't. So you have to make a choice. Are you going to be a father to your child? Or are you going to run away, leaving us to fend for ourselves? Because as far as I see it, those are the only choices you have."

It's not a choice at all, Gale knows, so he promises her. No more sleepovers. No more Bucky unless they meet in a public setting or with Marge present. No more secrets.

They both go to work then, Gale avoiding Bucky's inquiring gazes whenever he finds an excuse to leave the room. After work, he makes his way to the bar.

Chapter End Notes

> I hope y'all enjoy this ride... I promise it will get better... eventually. For now, feel free to yell at me below, I suppose.
>
> Come find me on Tumblr: Nici Jones

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

> “What’s it to you?” Bucky asks, pulling another cigarette from the pack in his breast pocket. Gale isn’t sure what the right thing to say to that is so he doesn’t say anything. “You want me to absolve you?”

Chapter Notes

> A tad delayed again but oh well. We continue down the spiral with Gale and meet rock bottom.
>
> Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Marge is the happiest she’s ever been since Gale got back or perhaps she’s just getting better at pretending. He keeps his word but it was obvious that it would only get them so far until Bucky shows up at his doorstep.

Gale stares at him, his wide eyes, his pale skin, the stench of whiskey all over him on his front porch.

“Honey, who is it?” Marge asks and steps out of the kitchen. When she spots Bucky, she smiles sweetly. “Oh Bucky, I haven’t seen you in ages. How are you?” Everything about her seems sincere but she steps up to his side, bump showing and arm snaking around his waist. The gesture couldn’t be clearer. *Back the fuck off, John Egan.*

Gale doesn’t say a word. What is there to say?

Bucky would have probably just turned tail without saying a word if the timer on Marge’s cake hadn’t gone off. As it stands though, she rushes back into the kitchen and Bucky breaks out into hysterical laughter. Gale doesn’t think it’s particularly funny.

Bucky however is laughing, holding his sides and then wiping his tears. “Guess that answers that fucking question. Guess it’s a good thing I’m not a girl after all, huh?”

Gale swallows. There’s something he should be saying, he’s pretty sure but the words don’t come. Looks like not all things have changed.

Bucky sways forward, whiskey breath hitting Gale and making him lick his lips.

“You would’ve had me fat and round for the whole goddamn war.” Bucky’s smile when he pulls back is a cruel, ugly thing and the shame burns hot and bright in Gale’s stomach. Still, he doesn’t do anything as Bucky stumbles down the steps of his front porch and when Marge returns she just sends him a look, standing at the open door like an abandoned dog.

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During the war, Curt is the only one who knows about them even though in hindsight Gale is sure that others suspected. Rosie’s smile when Bucky’s voice had come through with the landing instructions, DeMarco offering to give them some privacy at Stalag Luft and Croz’s knowing gaze when he had teased Bucky leading to his hands all over Gale one night.

But Curt knows right away when Gale gets to Thorpe Abbotts. He shakes his hand after Bucky introduces them and he says, “Oh, you’re *Gale*.” Bucky had introduced him with his nickname, of course and Gale had cleared the whole thing up.

Curt had looked at Bucky when saying it and Gale’s stomach had dropped. That same night Curt had asked him if he’s seeing anyone and he’d told him about Marge. In hindsight, it’s obvious that he’d handed him the missing puzzle pieces. Then Curt had shown him the mark on his neck and given him some bullshit about a girl missing her man, a real fighter and a moaner, too. Kept calling him by his name apparently. Gale doesn’t put it together even as he sees Bucky turn pale at Curt’s side.

They hadn’t really talked about whether they would continue this thing once they got here. It’s not like Gale is going to see Marge anytime soon and they would do well to keep their heads in the game. He tells himself he’s imagining the lingering glances when they drive across base, checking up on their men and their planes. Bucky has always been affectionate around him, cracking jokes and turning towards him to see whether they made him laugh or not.

Curt catches him the day after he lands, never having a given a fuck about rank or decorum as he crawls into Gale’s plane. “Major, you mind if I join you?”

“Curt, how can I help you?” Gale asks, going over a routine check,
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seated in the pilot seat.

“Nothin’ for me particularly, I s’pose.” Gale turns and sees him slouched against a wall, twisting a toothpick between his fingers. “Just seeking refuge from Egan’s whining.”

Gale smiles and turns back to the console. “He lose another bet?”

“Nah, just moping. Missed you something fierce, I think.” Gale pauses. He’d missed Bucky, too. The three weeks had been the longest they’d been apart since meeting each other in flight school and it had felt like walking around with a missing limb. Marge had left two days after Bucky, kissing him deeply but Gale hadn’t sucked a bruise into her skin and blamed his nerves. Maybe he needed more practice - even though Bucky and him had wasted the entire night on it, hands shoved under uniforms, quiet chuckles in the dark of the night. Gale grows hot under the collar of his sheepskin at the thought. He clears his throat.

“Well, I’m here now, ain’t I? So I think he’s moping about something else, Curt.” He stares at the altimeter without seeing a thing.

“Gale,” Curt says and pushes forward, sinking into the co-pilot seat to face him. “You don’t have to hide this shit from me. There ain’t many folks you can talk to about this. Don’t turn it down when it happens.”

“Not sure what you’re talking about,” Gale mumbles, grip on his pencil tightening as he looks down at his clipboard.

“You know I ain’t sleeping with a *girl* that was sighing the wrong guy’s name. *Gale*.”

It’s not like his official documents had changed. The paperwork for the arriving personnel would have still said that Major Gale Cleven was flying in yesterday. But Curt wouldn’t have cared to look at those. Especially when Bucky is here, talking his ear off day in and day out. He would’ve told him all about how Buck is coming their way, making sure they all know him by the nickname he’d bestowed on him and nothing else. It all slots together then, Curt’s knowing tone when he’d told him his real name was Gale, the way he’d looked at Bucky, the story he’d given him the other night and how pale Bucky had turned.

“Not sure I know what you’re implying,” Gale mumbles, feeling his head spin. They weren’t like that. Bucky is just helping him out.

Curt sighs. “I ain’t gonna judge you for whatever you have going on

with that girl of yours but I can tell you that this man is down bad." His gaze drifts outside where Bucky is driving towards Gale's plane. "Don't mess him up, Buck. He's a good one."

Curt had left him then, stewing in his nerves. Not much later, Bucky is climbing up into the cockpit himself. Gale tries not to think about what kind, if any, conversation had transpired between the two of them.

"She in good shape?" Bucky asks. He has those large sunglasses on his face, his hat probably discarded in the backseat of his jeep. He looks golden in the sunlight.

"Can't complain," Gale admits when he looks over at Bucky in the co-pilot seat he thinks about the bruise Curt had shown him and something new and ferocious curls through Gale. He wants to hit Curt and he wants to hurt Bucky. He has no claim to what either of them get up to in their free time and it'd be mighty hypocritical of him to report them. Somehow he doubts that Bucky had just been showing Curt his tricks and that, too, doesn't sit right with him.

"Curt said you've been moping," Gale says, mostly to see whether Bucky would try to deny it, give them both an excuse.

Bucky shrugs, falling back into the seat. "Hate being stuck here while y'all get to make a difference out there."

Gale can't deny the relief that floods him at the words. It has nothing at all to do with him. So was Curt just trying to mess with him? But the name thing… it all seems too much of a coincidence to be something that Curt made up to rattle Gale.

He licks his lips, considers it for a moment. "Keeps you safe though," he ends up saying instead of the million things he wants to ask.

Bucky huffs. "You worried about me, Cleven?"

"You do plenty to warrant that worry, Egan," Gale teases back and he revels in the easy laugh that breaks out of Bucky's throat, brilliant white teeth, mirth sparkling in his eyes. Gale thinks about Bucky's teeth and Curt's skin again.

"Help me check the tailgunning station?" He asks before he can overthink it. When they walk back through the plane, Bucky launches into a story about a tailgunner that had bet to beat him at arm wrestling. It serves as enough distraction that Bucky doesn't ask any

question when Gale wrenches the hatch shut and leads him into the darkness of his plane. His heart is beating in his throat but he tries to remind himself of the feeling he'd gotten when he'd realized that Bucky had found entertainment while he'd been waiting for him, the feeling that had whispered to him when Curt had told him that it had been his name that Bucky had sighed.

He catches Bucky's wrist in the dark belly of his plane and the man looks back at him with wide eyes. "Didn't give her a hickey before I left," he tells Bucky. "Think I need a little more practice." He reaches for the buttons of Bucky's shirt then but the bruise he leaves is high up, barely covered when he shifts and moves. Half of it is on open display when he throws his head back in laughter at dinner that night.

Gale catches Curt's pleased gaze at the sight of it over dinner. It makes him put his hand on Bucky's thigh, knowing the other's would brush it off as him trying to keep Bucky in his seat while he launches into another story.

Curt is the only one who had ever told Gale that he knew and perhaps he knew much more than what he let on even, certainly more than Gale knew at the time. One time he catches his gaze after Bucky grabs his face, fingers squeezing his chin and leaving him remembering a million things that he shouldn't know about his best friend. *Smitten*, Curt had mouthed at him then but Gale had dismissed it as a misread.

Gale becomes concerned about their secret getting out after he gets on his knees for Bucky for the first time. The way Bucky comes seconds after Gale had wrapped his lips around the tip of his cock, exactly in the way he had told Gale experience would cure him of. It doesn't matter though, whether Curt knew how deep their lies ran because he takes their secret into his early grave.

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Bucky disappears off the face of the earth for a month. When he returns, he invites himself to lunch, tells them he's bringing someone with him.

Marge loves Josephine immediately. Of course she does.

Gale looks at her short blonde hair, her blue eyes and tightly pressed WASP uniform and wonders how Marge thinks that this solves anything.

But then, he sees their matching rings.
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Then, he hears Bucky say, “I was even thinking, maybe you’d be my best man?”

Marge is clapping and chuckling. Gale feels like if there was any time for the ground to open up and swallow him whole, right about now would be nice.

It doesn’t happen though, so he chokes out a ‘yes’ instead because they have an audience and it’s the right thing to do and it is what’s expected of Gale Cleven.

Apparently now Marge deems it safe enough to leave them alone on the porch, the sun setting and dousing them in golden light. Gale tries not to stare at Bucky but can’t help himself. Sometimes when this would happen, he’d already find Bucky looking. Today, Bucky is looking everywhere but Gale. He’s telling him about a guy from Manitowoc that he hadn’t seen since he’d signed up and whom he’d apparently owed some money.

Gale wonders if that guy is named Buck. If the guy even exists.

“She make you happy?” Gale asks, not letting Bucky finish his story.

It stops him in his tracks. Marge had forced them to recount their entire meeting story. The way he’d seen her first, walking down the street and immediately known. The way she’d punched him in the face later on when he’d come on too strong. The way they’d spend the entire time Bucky’d been there together, swimming in Lake Michigan which had been way too cold this time of year, him taking her to meet his family. A family that Gale has never met. All of it makes him sick to his stomach.

“What’s it to you?” Bucky asks, pulling another cigarette from the pack in his breast pocket. Gale isn’t sure what the right thing to say to that is so he doesn’t say anything. “You want me to absolve you?”

It would be nice, Gale thinks, selfishly. He knows he’s hurt Bucky. Worse than he could ever take back. He shouldn’t have asked him before the wedding if they were going to be alright. He should’ve never asked him to be his best man in the first place. He knows that now. Now that Bucky had done the same to him.

“You’ll be waiting a long time for that,” Bucky mumbles. “I’m moving on. Not like you ever gave me a choice in the matter after all.”

Something bitter rises in Gale. It had always been so simple in Bucky’s

mind. He just didn't marry Marge, he just- what? Kept sneaking around with him like the government isn't trying to kill them all now that the Nazis are dead? They served their countries, what else are they good for? Bitterness rises in his chest and he aches for a drink now.

"Moving on, huh? Then why is she a fucking lookalike, John?" He stares at him, icy blue eyes staring back, caught in a wordless duel.

In the end, Bucky doesn't say anything, just gets up and Gale turns his head as he brushes past him to check on the women, he assumes. Marge is showing Josephine the nursery that Gale had been working on.

Bucky doesn't even make it inside though, Josephine meeting him on the doorstep. He wraps his arms around her at once, leaning down to press a passionate kiss to her lips. When he tears his eyes away, he can see Marge staring at him behind their backs.

Bucky doesn't tell him that night that he'd requested a transfer to the base that Josephine works at. Perhaps he'd never planned to, perhaps Gale's biting comment had made him reconsider.

Either way, everyone gets what they want and Gale feels like he's lost a war he hadn't even known he'd been fighting.

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It takes Gale almost embarrassingly long to figure out that Bucky is queer. Like a proper queer, not the kind he understands exist during wartime when women are scarce to come by and the need for distraction through earthly pleasures is at an all time high. No, it takes him a long time to figure out that Bucky is the kind of queer that can fall in love with other men and whisper impossible promises in the moonlight knowing they'll never come to pass.

Perhaps part of that is self-preservation, perhaps part of it is the fact that he had never thought much about Bucky in the context of romance.

Bucky is intense. When they first started hanging out in flight school he'd find the love of his life every week in a different woman. It takes Gale awhile to figure out that he isn't exaggerating, he truly loves those women with such ferocity that he ends up on the other side of them by the time Monday rolls around. Gale isn't sure that he's ever seen Bucky *in love*. He's not sure what that would even look like.
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So no, he doesn't really think that Bucky could look at a man and think of love. Not until that fateful night between mission 14 and 15. They are in one of the pubs in town, a regular occurrence in the grand scheme of things, Gale never able to say no to Bucky's pleading eyes for too long. That night, they run into two RAF pilots. It's always a tossup with them - they either get along like a house on fire or burn the whole place down in their wrath. These are at once friendly, thick as thieves themselves and swapping stories with them about how they became friends.

One of them, Ian, is a commanding officer but the difference in rank doesn't seem to deter them from being close. Christopher's arm is wrapped around his middle, face flushed by alcohol. Bucky is handsy that night but nothing that Gale isn't used to and the way Ian keeps egging Bucky on is not helpful. Bucky's hand is in his hair, on his chin, smoothing down his uniform. It's heady when that happens. Gale isn't sure whether it's something that Bucky used to do before- Well, before.

But now, every time it happens, it ignites a path of fire down his spine. He's gotten less careful, less diligent about keeping his excuses in a line. These days all it takes is looking at Bucky for a second too long, their hands brushing or Bucky tilting his head like that and he would be pulling him into an equipment room or into the jeep to drive away from base.

"You're adorable," Ian told them and the meaning of those words twists in the low light behind the pub. Gale had pulled Bucky outside shortly after the two pilots had excused themselves. With blackout calls throughout the country there's barely any light to begin with and none back here - the precise reason why Gale had deemed it safe enough, but he can still make out the two familiar figures. Their heads are bent close together, Christopher's arms wrapped around Ian's neck before their lips meet in a slow languid kiss. It freezes Gale in his tracks.

Gale tries not to think about the fact that he'd dragged Bucky out here for the same purposes.

"Hey!" Bucky calls from where he stands with an arm slung around Gale's shoulders. "Don't get caught!" He calls down the alleyway and the two of them snicker, separating and throwing a wave at them.

Uneasiness twists in Gale's stomach. "You can't just do that. What if- I mean shouldn't we-"

Bucky pushes into his side, making Gale step back and connect his shoulder with the wall of the pub. “Not gonna go reporting them. Love is hard to come by in this fucking war,” he slurs, eyes finding Gale’s. “Not that you’d understand that.”

Gale blinks up at Bucky in the dim light. “Love?”

“Yeah,” Bucky mumbles and reaches up to cup Gale’s face. “They were absolutely gone for each other. Hard enough to find love as a queer even without a fucking war on. Be mighty hypo- hypocit- wrong of me to judge ‘em with me being one of them and all.”

The words work like a hose with ice water. Suddenly Gale is very much present, despite Bucky’s eyes still straying to his lips every so often. “What do you mean, one of them?”

“C’mon Gale, you know this.” Bucky mumbles, thumb tracing the stubble that had started to grow on Gale’s chin during the day. “Bucky Egan, biggest faggot west of Chicago.”

Gale thinks of Curt. He thinks of the way Bucky would sometimes disappear on a night out without a woman. He thinks of Bucky after he gets back, reaching up to press his finger to the hickey Gale left on him in that plane.

Maybe he did know this all along and just hadn’t wanted to see it.

He lets Bucky kiss him then, pressed against the uneven stone of the old pub and tries his best not to think about what it means, them doing what the RAF pilots had just done. The ones that were in love.

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When Bucky had told him at Stalag Luft that he loved him, it took Gale’s breath away. He hadn’t allowed it to change anything though. He never even let himself think about it.

He thinks about it now, lying in a ditch on the side of the road. Thinks those terrible, terrible words he’d kept locked inside himself for years.

It’s a normal Tuesday and perhaps there should have been an occasion. Something to trigger the spiral that had ended with Buck here. There wasn’t though. One moment he was doing his job, checking on the cadets that were unpacking equipment, the next he realizes he can’t do it anymore. Can’t keep pretending, can’t keep putting himself through the motions, can’t keep acting like he came
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back from the war and everything is normal. That he didn't come back wrong and twisted up inside.

So he turns and walks away. No one stops him. No one stops him from buying the liquor and no one stops him from drinking it down like water.

No one stops him from thinking *I'm in love with Bucky Egan.*

Cars are blazing past on the highway and the sun is starting to set and Gale weeps. Perhaps there was a life where it made a difference. Perhaps there was a life where he'd made a different choice. Maybe he should have listened to Bucky for once. They would've figured it out, they always have. Because what kind of alternative is this?

Gale had always thought that Marge is nice enough, makes him happy enough, is pretty enough that it doesn't matter he was never consumed by want around her. It was just that he'd gone ahead and taught himself better. He'd acquainted himself with the fire that is Bucky Egan and now he feels so incredibly cold.

"I fucked it up," he mumbles and tastes dirt between his teeth. "I fucked it all up."

When he blinks his eyes open, he believes to see Curt standing above him. His mouth is twisted in an unhappy line. "Curt!" Buck calls out and how many more men had died instead of him? How many names did he not even remember? "Curt, I fucked it all up."

Curt crouches at his side, a warmth in his eyes that Gale had rarely seen during his lifetime, usually overridden by mirth. It's like in the plane though, when he'd told him not to break Bucky.

"Not the end of the world, Cleven. Nothing that can't be fixed, huh?"

Gale swallows. "It's too late."

"Horseshit. It ain't never too late for anything. And frankly, you don't much look like you're gonna survive if you keep going like this." Gale knows that he's right. It had been pure dumb luck that he'd stumbled into the ditch and not into oncoming traffic.

"The perfect Gale Cleven, completely unraveled," Curt hums thoughtfully.

"Never claimed t'be perfect," Gale mumbles. His head hurts. Did he

hit something on his way down?

“No but you pretended to be. Strutted around, had it all figured out, didn’t you?” Gale turns his head. Curt seems to be oddly wavering in the evening air. That’s probably because he’s dead and Gale is stuck talking to himself. “Turns out all that wife and picket fence and two kids bullshit they feed us isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, huh?”

Gale feels fresh tears coming on. He doesn’t want to turn into his father. He doesn’t want his baby girl to resent him (it’s a girl, he knows that the same way he knows that the sun will rise in the East in the morning). He loves her. He just doesn’t know if he can be for her what people expect him to be. Surely, Marge deserves better than this. Surely, Bucky does, too.

“No,” he whispers and he wishes he could reach out and hug Curt. He wishes Curt would reach out and hug Gale himself.

“Ain’t no shame in trying and failing, Buck. And you gave it an honest try. Now you go back and you apologize. Marge first. You put her through it.” Gale swallows. He knows that Curt is right. He’d been cheating on her from the first time he’d pushed into Bucky Egan’s hand. Maybe, if he felt like being cruel to himself - and he does - it started when Bucky had given him that godforsaken nickname and Gale had kept it.

“And then,” Curt adds, “you apologize to Bucky. He’ll forgive you.” Gale shakes his head violently. “You know he will.”

“I don’t think he will, Curt,” he whispers. “And even if he did… I don’t think I deserve it. I really, really fucked up. I fucked us up.”

“Let me tell you something,” Curt says and Gale wonders distantly if he’s doing okay. If the afterlife is nice for him. “There’s no world in which Bucky Egan wouldn’t forgive Buck Cleven. You’ll grovel and he’ll kiss you and you’ll keep apologizing and he’ll tell you it’s already forgiven.”

Gale huffs a laugh because it definitely has happened before. He can see it so clearly and yet the chasm between them seems insurmountable now. Between Marge and the unborn girl and Josephine. What chance does Gale have to get himself back on track? And anyway, he’s not so sure that he deserves it.

“Get yourself up, Cleven. C’mon. There are people counting on you. You really want to miss the birth of your little girl? No, I didn’t think

so.” Gale huffs, glaring at Curt. He digs his fingers into the dirt. “You gotta believe it’s gonna work out. But just eating up your feelings until the day you die will suffocate you.” Gale pushes himself up. The world teeters back and forth around him. “They deserve for you to try, you hear me?”

Curt vanishes then as Gale gains his footing back, stumbling towards the lights of the city.

Chapter End Notes

What if I promise that things are going to start getting better?

Find me on Tumblr: Nici Jones

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

> “I’m sorry,” he says again even though he understands that somewhere, deep down, that this isn’t his fault. It wasn’t his choice to fall out of love with her. It wasn’t her choice to never stop loving him either.
>
> “What do we do now?” She asks and he can see tears welling up in her eyes. One of her hands finds her bump, tracing it idly. The very being that would tie them together for the rest of their lives. At least if Buck let it.

Chapter Notes

> The mending of a friendship or Buck's life changes. That isn't a bad thing.
>
> Thank you all for the kind response to the chapters, I really appreciate it. I hope y'all have fun with all the women power in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gale only knows what happened next because it was told to him. He ends up in their neighbors’ front yard, unconscious and is lucky that the man religiously waters his roses. He’s the one to alert Marge who had been sick with worry when he hadn’t come home. A call to the airbase had revealed that nobody knew where he was, despite abandoning station mid-duty.

He comes to on their couch, doctor Zinkbritz bent over him. “There he is,” the man mumbles and a worried Marge rushes to his side. Her soft touch stings, Gale knowing at once how undeserving he is of her worry. Had he ever loved her? He likes to think so. Perhaps he loves her still, he’s just not… in love with her.

“Hey, Buck, back with us?” She asks, brushing his hair back. He continues to drift in and out. Sometimes when he wakes up, he thinks he’s back at Thorpe Abbotts, sometimes he thinks he’s back at Stalag Luft. Either way, he calls out for Bucky.

When he wakes up for good it’s late in the day. It’s raining outside and his head is pounding. Slowly, the events of the previous day come

back to him and with it comes the shame. He pushes himself up, one hand carding through his hair. He's still wearing his uniform that is somehow stained with vomit and smells like dirt and sweat. Gale has never felt this gross. When he looks up, the living room still looks the same as he'd left it - clean and orderly. Marge sits in one of the arm chairs, knitting another onesie for their child.

"Marge," he mumbles, feeling his heart ache at the thought of what he'd done to her. It makes him want to try harder but a voice that sounds suspiciously like Curt tells him that he already has. That it's time to admit defeat and find a different war to fight.

She puts her work in progress down, taking in his rumbled form on the couch. How had they gotten here? They'd been just kids yesterday. He'd always thought- well, then again he'd also thought that it would be Bucky and him up in the sky until the war was either won or lost. None of those things had come to pass.

"How are you feeling?" She asks and Gale has known her long enough to notice the emotions carefully tucked away under her soft tone.

"Awful but- not as terrible I suppose," he admits. He needs to get a glass of water. It seems selfish to even say that much though. "I'm sorry."

She gives him a small smile, one for his sake not because she fully means it. "I know."

"No, Marge, I- I made a huge mistake, I-"

"I know," she repeats and then when he looks at her desperately, she says, "I know, Buck."

"You never called me that."

"Gale's always been Gale," she admits. They both remember the first time he saw Marge after meeting Bucky, the way he'd told her the story of this crazy man who thought it funny to call him by the name of a guy from back home. How much Gale disliked the name Buck. But then how he'd looked up at the sky that he'd be flying through with Bucky just a few weeks later and he'd told her that he thinks he likes the guy anyway.

"You're not Gale anymore though. War changes men, it's nothing new. I just thought- Well, I thought you could still love me." Her gaze drops then, fingers playing with the yarn in her lap. "But you're Buck now.

Bucky's."

Gale swallows. They'd all hoped to leave behind the versions of them that they had become during the war and most of them hadn't been all that successful. He can now count himself among those men, he supposes. "I thought I could love you, too."

She lets out a pained breath. "Don't make this harder than it has to be." When she looks up at him, Buck can see how deep the pain runs and it takes his breath away.

"I'm sorry," he says again even though he understands that somewhere, deep down, that this isn't his fault. It wasn't his choice to fall out of love with her. It wasn't her choice to never stop loving him either.

"What do we do now?" She asks and he can see tears welling up in her eyes. One of her hands finds her bump, tracing it idly. The very being that would tie them together for the rest of their lives. At least if Buck let it.

"I'm not gonna leave you two," Buck decides. "Not until you want me to. I just- I can't *lie* anymore."

She swallows, nods, her gaze dropping to her bump. "How- how long?" She asks then.

He looks at her for a long moment, tries to figure out exactly what she's asking and if it would be a good idea to tell her. How long has he been in love with Bucky or how long has he been cheating on her?

"Are you sure-" He starts, knowing that once said, he can never take it back.

Her eyes are fiery when she looks up at him. "When did you start sleeping with him? I deserve the truth, at least. As *your wife*."

Buck swallows. "Flight- flight school," he admits quietly. He can't pinpoint the exact day, just that it was a hot day, as were most days in Randolph, Texas, between May and September.

"Fl- flight school?!" She whispers, eyes wide with horror. This was almost as long as they'd been thinking seriously about each other. The whole reason why he'd been so tempted to take Bucky's invitation for lessons in the first place. However, he can see it still stung. "This whole time?" She asks, glassy eyes meeting his own.

There is truly nothing he can say to make it better. Everyone always thought that Gale Cleven had it figured out. They couldn't have been more wrong about it. He'd just gotten incredibly good at covering up the cracks and now, it's all catching up with him.

"And you what- you're *in love* with him?" She asks, voice quivering on the words.

Buck swallows. "Yes. I'm in love with Bucky."

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How had it taken Gale so long to admit to himself what might have been terribly obvious by the time they got to Thorpe Abbotts? His excuses get flimsier and flimsier with each plane that drops from the heavens, each one could have been Bucky and it makes Marge seem further and further away. When he steps on solid ground, shaken from a mission or when they scrub before even getting into the air, it's Bucky who is there. Understanding what it takes out of a man to keep up morale and do something that, very early on, they'd understood to be a pointlessly suicidal task.

So no, he'd never admitted to himself that he's in love with Bucky but that doesn't mean the thought hadn't occurred to him. He thinks it once, twice, thrice even but he knows it would never change the outcome.

The first time, it's so surprising that he doesn't expect it at all. Bucky is stretched out on a bunch of hay in a barn they'd claimed as their own, knowing that other soldiers on the lookout for a quiet spot would see Bucky's jeep parked out front and turn tail. He'd gotten Bucky fully naked that day, reckless with the time they had. He'd spend a greedy amount of that time cataloging Bucky's body, licking and kissing and teasing him until he was squirming and sweaty, hay stuck in his hair and the prettiest sound falling from his lips. When Gale had finally wrung the orgasm from his body, he'd thought it then. Bucky's head thrown back, mouth open, his legs over Gale's shoulders, Gale had looked up at him and thought, *I'm in love with you.*

It happens again when Bucky falls asleep in his bunk for the first time at Stalag Luft III. Gale had been terrified of them being found out, not permitting himself even the slightest indiscretion in front of his men, so when he'd finally let Bucky crawl into his bunk with him - long after the others had started sharing - it's a relief for both of them. Bucky had curled into Gale's chest, his ear pressed against his ribcage
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and it's the first time that Gale lets himself truly consider what happened in London when news got back to Bucky that his plane had gone down. He also lets himself seriously consider the state Bucky had been in when he arrived at the camp, the things he refuses to talk about. That night, their fingers ding into each other's backs tightly. Gale had buried his nose in Bucky's filthy hair and thought, *God, I love you so much; I can't ever lose you*.

It happens again the night Bucky returns to him after Germany. Gale had clung onto the hope that he was alright, of course, but the Nazis had killed men for less than helping another guy escape and the fact they'd all made it as far as those pieces of shit were concerned, must've only fueled their anger. Nothing would ever beat the relief of following Bucky into his own plane and tackling him to the ground, capturing his lips in an eager kiss and thinking *I love you I love you I'm so glad you are alive I love you*. The fact that they'd both known then that time was running out had only made everything taste sweeter, including the stretch of Bucky's cock up Gale's ass that night.

They'd still flown out a few weeks later, thinking that they were leaving behind the versions of them that did something like that with each other. Holding hands and kissing each other deeply and slick grips on hard cocks and stifled moans and eye contact held across a crowded room for moments beyond what is considered normal or appropriate.

They'd both been wrong about that in different ways.

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Life goes back to normal. More or less. Gale spends most nights sleeping on the couch - which he'd been doing anyway because of the nightmares that would make him thrash first and wake up screaming later. Marge is restless, too, the child keeping her up. It still takes three weeks for her to let Gale comfort her again. It still hurts her, he can tell but he still wants to be there for her. He carries love for her even though it's not the kind of love she would like him to have.

Acceptance comes for her, albeit slowly. He catches her one time, staring at a picture of Bucky and him that someone had sent him. It was taken on the tarmac at Thorpe Abbotts. The look between them too long, too revealing for Buck to feel comfortable putting it up or even looking at it for too long.

"You don't have to-" Buck says, reaching out to take it from her. It's
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been many weeks since Bucky had left. Even his image painted in black and white makes his chest ache.

Before he can grab the picture though, she's moved it out of his reach, shaking her head. "Gale- Buck, I've been thinking."

He swallows, fear making his heart run in his chest. His life hadn't shaped out in a way that those words would indicate something good.

"There was this boy. In math class, you remember? Percy?" It's not where Buck had expected this to go at all but he nods. He hadn't thought about Percy in a long, long time but it doesn't mean he doesn't remember. Their friendship had been short but intense. "You two were attached at the hip and then you just- stopped talking. Was that-?"

It takes him a second to understand what she's asking. Bucky's picture in her hands. She's been thinking. "Oh no, no we never- I mean. Bucky was my first." He can feel his cheeks heat as he remembers Bucky's soft smile, his patient explanation and his guiding hands.

She grins and he knows that's progress. That she can smile at the hot embarrassment crawling up his throat. She's so good. He really doesn't deserve her.

Her expression sobers up then. "I'm not sure you are right about that."

He wants to protest but then makes himself pause. What had transpired between him and Percy? And then Simon at basic? They'd gone from living in each other's pockets to never speaking again. At the time, Gale had written it off at having missed someone that hugs him tight and listens to his stories. But hadn't they looked at him and hadn't he looked back? What if any of them had given him an excuse to touch their lips to his?

"And Bucky is marrying Josephine?" Marge asks, the question knocking Buck off his feet again.

"Yeah. I mean- I haven't heard from him but I imagine." They hadn't gotten a wedding invitation but all things considered, Gale wouldn't be surprised if they never did. If he'd run into him one day at some stupid military conference about air warfare and overhear someone talking about being at his wedding. Josephine Egan. Buck's stomach turns.

"Hey Gale," Marge says softly and turns to him, holding his gaze.

“Don’t- don’t give up on him quite yet. I know this isn’t what any of us wanted or- or imagined what it would look like but… I want to see you happy. I miss the way you used to smile around him.” Her own is sad as she reaches up, touches his chin. “Buck Cleven,” she says softly.

He isn’t sure that he deserves what she’s suggesting. Bucky had told him that he’s moving on. He’s not going to take that away from him all over again.

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It’s unexpected then when there’s a knock on his office door one day and Josephine walks in. She looks just as stunning in her flying leathers as she did in her civilian clothes but Buck’s throat closes up. For a terrifying moment, he thinks something happened to Bucky.

“At ease, Major,” Josephine says and there’s a small smile on her face. “He’s okay.”

Buck lets out a breath of relief and then wonders when he became so obvious. He gathers himself then, hastily and belated, standing to greet her. “How can I help you, ma’am?” When she shakes his hand, he can see the ring on her finger.

“Fly with me, Major.” It’s not a request but closer to an order. Buck is not about to pull rank though. She made it all the way here and he has a feeling this is important.

Not much later, he settles into the co-pilot seat of her plane and she sends him a grin. “John told me that he usually gives you the pilot seat. Sorry, but that’s not going to fly with me.” Despite everything, Buck finds that he knows exactly why Bucky likes her.

Once high in the skies, a more serious expression descends on her face. “Permission to speak freely?” She asks and the twist in his stomach tells him she’s not about to criticize his co-piloting. Or anything work-related for that matter.

“Granted,” he mumbles, hands sweaty in his gloves. He’s withstood 18 months of psychological torture by the Germans. He can be in a plane with the fiancee of the man he loves.

“John told me everything.”

Ice cold betrayal whips through Buck even though he’s not entitled to it. He’d told Marge when she’d asked. But it’s different, isn’t it? Marge
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has known both of them for almost a decade now. Who was Bucky going around sharing secrets that put both of them in danger with a woman he'd met two months ago?

"I lost my sweetheart during the war," she confesses then, her voice coming through the headphones with a crackle. Buck is reeling too much to express his condolences before she continues on. "She was a nurse. You'd think it's a safe job, wouldn't you? Caught tuberculosis. By the time they figured it out, she was mostly gone."

Gale reaches up to adjust his microphone, makes sure she'd understand him clearly when he asks, "She?"

Josephine looks over at him with a smile. "Why did you think Bucky trusted me with your guys' secret?"

Right. That makes more sense, he supposes. "Why are you telling me this?"

"You and me, Buck," of course she'd call him that. Everything she knows about him came from Bucky himself. He recalls Bucky's face the first time someone had called him Buck without anyone's prompting, the first time Gale had slipped up and called himself Buck. It had all been worth it for his smile. "We are the two people in this world that care the most about Bucky Egan. And I don't know about you but I don't want him to make a mistake and lose out on something that would make him the happiest man in the world."

Buck swallows, heart pounding in his chest. He's pretty sure she's going to ask for his blessing. "So I'm asking, are you sure this is what you want? You and Marge and the baby here. Us over there. Stilted dinners and muffled fights until you two give up on pretending to be friends? Or is there the possibility of something different?"

Something different? There's a lot that would suddenly have to start going right in Gale's life to permit that. It's a smokescreen fantasy at best. The cockpit is quiet between them for a long moment, just the roar of the engines outside. "Why are you asking me this? Don't you love him?"

"Sure," she tells him. "Same way you love Marge, I reckon. Pretty enough to sleep with and good enough of a man to share breakfast with in the morning. Won't bring me back Dorothy though."

Right. Dorothy. Buck sits in the roar of the engine for a long moment. Then, "he wouldn't forgive me. Not after what I did to him when we

came back. Before that, maybe. Not after choosing her over him twice."

"What if I told you that you're wrong?" Josephine asks.

"You can't decide that for him."

"No. But I know he loves you more than anything else in the world, Buck. More than his own life or whisky or me or his goddamn lucky jacket." Gale stares out of the side window, trying to wrangle the feeling in his chest back under control.

"Don't give me hope, Jo," he mumbles eventually, the nickname slipping over his lips easily.

"It's up to you, Buck. I'm just here because I don't want you to think that I'm standing in your way," she explains.

Chapter End Notes

> Only one more chapter to go!!! I can't believe it. I love this story so much and I'm happy you guys seem to feel similarly. See you soon with the end to this particular journey.
>
> Find me on Tumblr to yap about these idiots: Nici Jones

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

> Buck stands in the lobby, feeling faint suddenly. He's a father. He's going to be a father until the day he dies. He has a little girl.

Chapter Notes

> The end of a journey!! I really do love this fic so much. I loved reading all your comments as we followed Gale down this spiral into self-discovery and self-acceptance. All's well that ends well etc etc etc
>
> I hope to see you all on the next ride that will inevitably follow.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There's a tentative friendship settling between Buck and Marge and he's hesitant to disturb it by saying something about the encounter or the many things Josephine had bestowed upon him on that flight.

Marge is out of the house more and Buck is glad for it. She seems to be making friends with the other women whose husbands came back from the war, meeting up to drink coffee and playing cards multiple times a week. She's always been the social butterfly out of the two of them, so it's good to see her get back into the habit of that.

When she's home though, it's almost like he wanted it to be. They laugh together and she tells him to do the dishes, reveling in the fact that she's commanding a Major around. He indulges her, just happy to see her gleeful smile again. In turn, she stops him to put his hand on her bump when the child starts kicking.

Buck thinks of the ghost of Curt and how he hadn't believed him that it would get better. And yet here he is.

There is the thought of Bucky, of course and in the many sleepless nights he spends on the couch, he decides that while it wouldn't change a thing, it would be right to apologize to him. He's tolerated so much from him. He'd been lying to him and himself and Marge and they'd all ended up hurt because of it.

It remains a hopeful thought though instead of a concrete plan. Trying to plan out a trip to visit him seems like too much and orchestrating a

meeting under work circumstances needed a few things outside of his control to fall into place.

In the end, nothing happens in the way Buck had wanted it to. He wanted to have his things in order before his child was born, before he became a father. But the weeks slip by and then Marge goes into labor prematurely and Gale is losing his mind as he's forced to consider the fact that he might lose both of them.

The staff in the hospital on base know him, know him well enough that they call Bucky even though he doesn't tell them to. Buck wouldn't find this out until much later but Bucky and Josephine fly themselves to the hospital, the shortest trip between the states that separate them. All he knows in that moment is that they storm in, steps in unison, the way that Bucky and him used to walk around Thorpe Abbotts and Jo comes over to hug him immediately.

Bucky hovers, expression carefully closed off as Gale clings to Jo. He can't help but stare at him though. The cutting line of his uniform, his cheeks that still seem a little hollow, like he never gained back the weight he lost in Germany.

Bucky isn't looking at him but it's just as well.

"Mr Cleven?" A nurse asks, stepping up to him.

"Yes!" Gale pulls away, wiping his face to return some life into it.

"I bring good news. Both mother and daughter are well. Congratulations. You'll have to wait about ten more minutes before I can take you to see them," she explains.

He stares at her with wide eyes but she just smiles at him, probably used to tough military guys losing their shit a little in these situations. "I'll be right back," she assures the group at large.

Buck stands in the lobby, feeling faint suddenly. He's a father. He's going to be a father until the day he dies. He has a little girl.

There's a hand on his back and he realizes then that he stumbled. He turns his head and looks up at Bucky. Bucky who knew all along that this was the goal - a wife, a house, a child. He got it all. Stupidly, he's the most glad that Bucky is here so they can share the moment. He should be here. He should always be here.

Resignation flits across Bucky's face before his hand on Buck's back

wanders to his side, pulls him closer. “Congrats, Gale,” he says softly and Buck knows him too well to not hear the pain in his voice.

Bucky is warm even through his clothes and he’s real and he’s here, for some goddamn reason. So Buck leans his head against his shoulder. “Name’s Buck.”

“Oh?” It’s more of a surprised breath than anything else.

Suddenly, Buck is present, sees the past converging in this moment and that while he might have wanted to do things differently in hindsight, the only version of events he gets is this one. The only thing he can change is what happens next. “Bucky,” he says urgently, “we need to talk.”

“Mr Cleven? We are ready for you now.”

Buck hesitates, holding Bucky’s gaze. After a long moment, Bucky seems to find whatever he was looking for in Gale’s eyes and he nods. “Go see your girls, Buck.” It’s fond this time, accepting and it relieves Buck of some of the weight as he turns to follow the nurse.

Behind him, Jo sighs, giving Bucky a look. “Why can’t you two ever be normal about anything?”

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Joyce Marjorie Spencer-Cleven is the most beautiful child ever born. It’s Buck’s humble opinion but he frankly cannot fathom anyone more beautiful than her. He sits with her bundled up in his arms until they go numb, just staring at her face. Marge drifts off to sleep fairly quickly after he gets there, exhausted from the fear and the pain and the bringing a human being into the world. This is exactly why Buck would never leave either of them. She’s still his oldest friend and this is a burden he would love to carry for her and with her.

Eventually, they ask him if he wants to invite his visitors inside, to see the little girl.

He expects both of them to walk in but the door closes behind Bucky, his wide eyes fixed on the bundle in Buck’s arms.

“Hi,” Gale says, feeling his cheeks flush. He realizes that he’s still only half dressed, his leather jacket thrown over his pajamas from when he’d rushed Marge to the hospital this morning while Bucky had clearly been at work. The lines of his body through the uniform are
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still sharp.

“Hi,” Bucky says carefully as he steps closer, eying the girl in Buck’s arms.

“You want to hold her?” Buck asks. Bucky has always had a knack for kids while Gale remained slightly terrified of them. He knows first hand how long a biting comment can stick in a child’s head, without the adult ever even thinking twice about it. Bucky on the other side could regularly be found playing hide and seek with the kids on base. Or not found, sometimes. Gale had been enlisted to help by the kids more than once.

Now, with Bucky here, Buck needs to see him hold his daughter in his arms, needs to see the easy grin that always used to spread across his features when he was around the children.

“You sure Marge won’t mind?” Bucky asks, hand coming up only to drop again between them.

He’d told her that Bucky and Jo were here before she’d drifted off, having promised her to not keep secrets anymore. She’d just smiled knowingly and it had made hope bloom in Gale’s chest.

“Yeah, it’s okay. She knows you’re here,” Gale says and stands up, stepping closer.

He carefully places Joyce into his arms before taking a step back, looking between her and his face. She’s fast asleep, thankfully but the awe on Bucky’s face, the tenderness with which he cradles her to his chest, choke Buck up.

“Oh,” he says, unable to stop the noise from coming out of his throat. Bucky would make a great father, he’s always known that and he hopes with a sudden ferocity that his little girl would grow up knowing her uncle Bucky, to have someone to stand in when Buck inevitably wavers. His chest feels tight, picturing the little arms of his girl wrapped around Bucky’s neck, whispering secrets to him that she doesn’t dare to admit to her own father.

“Buck? Hey, Buck. What’s wrong?” Bucky asks, his worried eyes trained on Gale’s face and he realizes suddenly that he’s crying, relief gripping his bones with a ferocity he’s never felt before. They’re all okay. Marge and Joyce and Bucky. They’re all going to be okay. And Bucky can look at him with concern even after everything he’s put him through. This wonderful, wonderful man.

“I’m sorry,” Buck chokes out.

Bucky blinks before his expression shutters, realizing what he’s referring to. “Jo told me she talked to you,” Bucky says slowly, careful in a way that used to be the antithesis of John Egan.

Buck shakes his head. “This isn’t about that. She-” God, this really isn’t the time or the place to do it but fuck it, there would never be a right time for this. “I know she said that you might want- But it’s not about that. I ain’t gonna keep meddling in your life, Bucky. You were right to move on. I gave you no choice. But I have to apologize. It’s only right.” He squares his shoulders, ready for Bucky to tell him to go fuck himself. He deserves it and much worse.

Bucky stares at him. “Apologize for what.” It’s a question but it doesn’t sound like one, like he’s afraid to even ask it.

Buck sucks in a breath, knows that this might very well be the end to it all but he’d meant it when he’d said that he needs to apologize, that it’s the right thing to do. “I was lying to myself. I know that now and- I took advantage of you offering… Well, you know. I’m sorry for stringing you along, Bucky.” He draws in a deep breath.

“Because you never wanted to be with me in the first place.”

Buck stares at him. How had Bucky not figured it out already? Between the drinking and the last few weeks on the base and- “No, because I was too much of a goddamn coward to admit that I do.”

Bucky looks away, looks down at Buck’s daughter that he’s still holding.

“I don’t know-“

“Marge knows,” Gale blurts, suddenly desperate to have it all out in the open. “I mean she found out about us after we- that day we- you know. She told me she was pregnant and I lost it and she pulled it out of me. And she knows that when you left with Jo, I- well I ain’t proud of it but she knows I’m in love with you and she doesn’t like it but I think she forgave me. Anyway, I just wanted you to know that I’m sorry. I was-“ he shakes his head. “I been thinking about it a lot and I abused your goodwill. I know you got Jo and I’m happy for you guys, I really am. She’s a great girl, Bucky. And if you want me to, I'll be your best man still. It’ll hurt like hell but I owe you that much and much more.” He looks up for the first time into Bucky’s wide eyes.

Then Bucky starts laughing and tearing up at the same time. “Gale-Buck, you-“ He gasps and then steps closer, one hand fitting to his cheek before leaning over his daughter to kiss him.

It’s more of a peck really, their dry lips pressed together and Buck’s hands instinctively come up to shield his daughter caught between them.

Bucky pulls back, tears still in his eyes but a grin growing on his face. “And people think you’re the smart and sane one.”

Gale can’t help but stare at him, love overflowing in his system. “I’m sorry,” he says again.

“Don’t make me kiss you again,” Bucky says, dropping his hand from Gale’s cheek to stabilize Joyce in his arms.

When he looks up, he groans. “Wipe that look off your face, Cleven, I know exactly what you’re thinking.” He’s grinning though as he looks back down at Joyce.

“Stay at mine tonight?” Buck asks quietly, not sure that that’s what they just did.

“Mmh,” Bucky hums like he’s contemplating it. “Are you gonna cook dinner?”

“There’s leftover casserole in the fridge.”

“Oh good. I want to live to see tomorrow,” Bucky teases but Gale can’t help but think of waking up and looking into Bucky’s face.

“Yes please do,” he mumbles, a touch too sincere for the situation but Bucky’s cheeks flush and it doesn’t matter.

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They walk out to meet Jo eventually, letting both child and mom rest. She smiles at them.

“Fatherhood looks good on you, Buck,” she tells him and he can’t help but look up at Bucky, hovering behind his shoulder. She sighs. “I used the time and got myself a hotel room to stay in for the night. Here’s the address.” She shoves a piece of paper into the breast pocket of Bucky’s uniform, knowing just like Buck that telling him would result in him forgetting immediately.
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She doesn't even ask whether Bucky will be joining her. He doesn't offer.

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Buck feels nervous all over again when they get to the house. Like he's never brought Bucky here, like he's never kissed him before, like he's a fumbling teenager all over again. He swallows and leads Bucky inside. He's told him all about how Marge had gone into labor, the way Joyce used to keep her up all night and make Buck so desperate that he even tried to sing to her.

There's a hush that falls over them though when Bucky hangs his uniform cap on one of the coat hangers in the hallway, their leather jackets sitting side by side.

Buck's heart is beating in his throat. His hands are sweaty. Is it always like this? He wonders. He remembers the thrill of sneaking around with Bucky on base but had always charted it up to the secrecy of it all. They'd settled into companionship in Germany eventually. Lingering touches, longer looks. But it was comforting more than anything else. Unless, of course, Bucky woke up deciding to rile Buck up.

Buck looks around his house, anywhere but Bucky even though he can feel his gaze on him. "So… this is it."

"This is it," Bucky agrees and then he's crowding Gale against the wall, lips finding his, hands pushing under the flimsy layers of his pajama that he's still wearing. It's desperate and frantic and Gale doesn't have it in him to stop him or slow him down.

They should talk about this, probably, but when have they ever done things in the right order?

Later, when Bucky grins up at him with his dopey, post-orgasm smile, Buck cradles his head in his hands, kisses him softly.

"Say it again," Bucky says when he pulls back.

"What?" Buck asks, unsure what Bucky is referring to. He tries to remember what the last thing he said was. "Just like that Bucky?"

Bucky breaks out in a laugh. "No." He stifles the laugh but Gale can still see the mirth twinkling in his eyes. "What you said at the hospital. Say that again."
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Oh. Gale draws in a deep breath, conjures up the feeling of guilt that he feels every time he thinks about their entwined pasts. “I’m sorry.” He’ll apologize however often Bucky wants.

“No, the other thing.” Bucky urges.

Gale thinks back to it. The words that had come out twisted and never as precise as he’d want them to but he’d said the right thing all the same. He finds them then, suddenly feeling silly for having said it out loud in the middle of all that. But Bucky already knew, he’s sure. “I’m in love with you, Bucky Egan.”

“Love you more,” Bucky whispers and leans down to kiss him again.

Somewhere there’d been a little boy with blonde hair and a black eye and he’d wondered if he’d ever even be capable of feeling love. He’d thought he’d figured it out with Marge or was close enough that he could pretend that he did. It had taken the impossible, wonderful Bucky Egan to come along and give him his name and wrap his arms around him to teach him what love really feels like. And even though it had seemed more like a loss when he’d realized, he can’t imagine it being any other way now.

“Love *you* more,” Buck whispers.

Chapter End Notes

> There's more to their story. Moments of doubts, moments of miscommunication and awkward wrangling as the four of them figure out how to do this. While not included, I definitely think that Bucky will struggle to fully forgive Gale and trust him again for awhile. It hasn't hit him here quite yet but it will. Right now, he's so focused on taking what Gale is willing to give him in the moment that he's not really thinking long-term. However, once the domestic bliss sets in, he'll have moments of doubting if what Gale is offering him is something that he really means. Frankly, I wasn't as interested in telling that story. However, I hope to see you when it's time to share the next story that I'm interested in telling.
>
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End Notes

Every comment and kudo is appreciated.

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